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*Religious Pluralism, Fundamentalism and Contested Identities in North American
Orthodox Religious Life: The Case of the Greek Orthodox Church in North America*

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Introduction

I would first like to thank Orthodox Christian Laity (OCL) for organizing this event and for inviting me to present this discussion of religious pluralism, fundamentalism, and contested identities in the Greek Orthodox Church in American. My hope is that this presentation will contribute to critical thinking and constructive conversation concerning the present and future of Orthodoxy we so deeply care about. I also want to thank the clergy and laity who have taken a part in the study. A great deal has been learned from individuals and groups during interviews about the meaningful place of beliefs and practices enlivened in Orthodox parishes. Insights have been gained concerning the place of parish life and the Orthodox faith in shaping personal and collective identities in a religious heritage cherished by many interviewed for this study. I am solely responsible for findings and interpretation in this account.

This presentation draws from ethnographic research concerned with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA) as it adapts to a changing and plural cultural, social, and religious landscape in North America.¹ The focus of the wider ethnography is on social and cultural forces transforming the lived experiences of Greek Orthodox Christians and GOA institutions in 21st century America. The study points to complex forces rooted in a changing American social, cultural and religious landscape articulating with and reshaping Orthodox Christian beliefs, traditions, and practices. Orthodoxy in America is in a dialectical relationship with a plural socio-cultural and

religious landscape that is giving way to questions about personal and collective social and moral identities, religious practices, church leadership, governance, and authority.

I will first discuss *religious pluralism* as a social and cultural force shaping Orthodoxy on American soil. For discussion of religious pluralism informing my research I refer you to Diane Eck, *A New Religious America: How A "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2001). And to the Pluralism Project Eck directs at <http://pluralism.org> for updated research projects and reports on the religious pluralism in North America.

Briefly here are four points from the pluralism project Diane Eck framed to guide our discussion.

First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the *energetic engagement with diversity*. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.

Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the *active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the *encounter of commitments*. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.

Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the

“table” will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table — with one’s commitments.

Please consider visiting the Pluralism Project and engage lessons that may be gleaned from this work for the purpose of the thinking and acting in your parish.

Second, I focus on emergent discourse within the GOA community on what interviewees in my study refer to as a “growing fundamentalism” rooted in the teachings and practices of Elder Ephraim, the founder and leader of several monasteries throughout the United States. In this account, I apply the term *fundamentalism* as it represents the insider ethnographic voice. *Fundamentalism* is the term that people use and are using as they grapple with changes in their parishes introduced by clergy carriers of Elder Ephraim’s beliefs and practices. In this account, I also apply the term fundamentalism as an analytic tool following Gabriel A. Almond, et al, Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003). Strong Religion, is based on the 10-year Fundamentalism Project lead by Professor Martin Marty at the University of Chicago. Qualities I find in Elder Ephraim’s institutions that follow the cultural schema of fundamentalism framed in Strong Religion include:

Antagonism towards encroachments of secularization in religious life.

Ambivalence towards modern science while simultaneously adopting science based medicine and state of the art technologies to advance their institutions.

There is no pluralism for fundamentalist groups as their group embodies the truth.

Women are subordinate to men. Wives are subservient to their husbands. And in some instances, sisters are subordinate to brothers.

A women’s role is to be a mother and homemaker.

Married couples are subservient to spiritual leaders.

The religious rules of fundamentalist groups are complex, rigid, and demand obedience and self-sacrifice.

Fundamentalist sequester children in environments where they are socialized by adherents of the religious system.

Fundamentalist seek to live their lives in enclave communities with like-minded adherents.

Outsiders are shunned and cast off.

Outsiders are the enemy.

I am arguing that we have parallel and dialectically related phenomena unfolding in the GOA—pluralism and emergent fundamentalism grounded in Elder Ephraim's teachings and institutions. The social forces of pluralism and fundamentalism are transforming GOA institutions and lived experiences of GOA clergy and laity.

Third, I discuss contested voices and conflict unfolding in the GOA over the failure on the part of Orthodox leaders to engage questions and concerns raised by the lay people about Elder Ephraim's teachings and practices. We will see that the laity have alerted GOA leaders to parish community disruptions and fragmentation, broken family relationships, sharp membership and stewardship decline, and a growing number of unchurched Greek Orthodox Christians directly related to the Elder Ephraim's teachings. In the final section I focus on a growing body of Greek Orthodox Christians who are no longer willing to defer to local Bishops who are silent and complicit on the matter of Elder Ephraim's teachings. In the eyes of lay leaders, local Bishops have proven indifferent to individuals, families and entire parish communities harmed by the Elder and his monastic and clergy following. I argue that disputes over the teaching of Elder Ephraim has been the catalyst for raising questions about Archbishop Demetrios

and individuals and institutions under him including, Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological School..

Pluralism and Changing Greek American Culture and Religious Life

In American religious bodies, including the GOA, the laity are challenging church leaders to address faith matters in the light of changing social norms and values centred on individualism, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness unencumbered by tradition. In response to individuals and groups who question and challenge religious practices, American religious bodies are examining, modifying, and resisting changes concerning positions on laity roles in church life, leadership and ministry roles for women, the place of gender and sexual identity in church life, and church governance among other matters.²

First generation Greek Americans and their descendants identify with mainstream American perspectives on human freedom and individual choice in private matters including religious life. They are upwardly mobile and largely work and live in urban and suburban settings. They seek and achieve post-secondary education and professional training. They are integrated into American society and positioned to take advantage of economic, social, and political opportunities leading to upward mobility. They identify with and participate in American national celebrations of the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving rooting themselves in the story of American democracy, progress, opportunity, and freedom. Greek Americans and their offspring in the contemporary

² See Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1985) pp. 219-249 for discussion of unencumbered individualism and the separation of private and public spheres in American religious life.

period are far more invested in symbols and meanings encoded in the American national pastimes of baseball, football, and basketball than the stories of Greek freedom fighters in the 1821 War of Independence or the world-historical events of the 1940s that devastated Greece and pushed their ancestors out of Greece. Greek Americans have woven the spectacular and commercial culture of Super Bowl Sunday into the fabric of their family annual routines. Interest in the Greek national story and contemporary Greece is shallow and fading among Greek Americans as they embrace the American story and identity that asserts the primacy of the individual unencumbered by the past.

Thus, the Greek ethno- national identity shaping GOA communities and parishes in the 1900s has outlived its purpose of holding a community together around the ties of a collectively conceived and shared ethno-religious past.³ I am arguing that the Greek American community is assimilating according to a pattern of American individualism and community framed by sociologist Robert Bellah, et al in Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Habits of the Heart. Habits of the Heart became an immediate classic in the study of American society and culture when it was published in 1985. It has since been widely read in sociology department, religious studies departments, American Studies programs and seminaries throughout the United States. Bellah's discussion of individualism and concomitant fragmenting communities

³ For discussion of the place of the church in contemporary Greek American life see Peter Moskos, *Greek Americans Struggle and Success*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey 2014. This updated edition first written by Charles Moskos includes discussion of church organization and parish practices as they have adapted to the American context. Pp. 87-108.

in the United States gives way to analysis of fading attachments to religious institutions and the decline of religious life.

The legacy of parishes functioning as ethno-national communities among Greek settlers is no longer relevant to Greek Orthodox Christians seeking full participation and integration in an increasingly multiracial and diverse American society.⁴ In the current multicultural social climate, GOA Bishops and clergy can no longer invoke or depend on ethnocentrism and xenophobia to prohibit Greek Orthodox Christians from engaging in interfaith dialogue, social relations, marriages, and religious experiences outside the Orthodox fold. The Greek Orthodox Church includes people who do not speak Greek or identify with Greek history and culture. Many in the GOA do not identify with the Greek American migration and settlement narratives. As Bellah notes, on American soil, assimilation dissolves collective memories and shared history.⁵

In this plural social climate, lay Orthodox Christians are raising questions about paternalism, sexism, homophobia, church administration and accountability. To date the GOA responds by asserting the primacy of males in clergy and leadership roles in Church tradition and history. The response is acceptable for some but not all women. LGBTQ Orthodox Christians are seeking an open and inclusive place in the Orthodox

⁴ I discuss the legacy of race discrimination, legal segregation and Greek nationalism in shaping Greek Orthodox personal and collective identity and parish life in the 1900s in Frances Kostarelos, “*Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches in North America: Continuity and Change in the Twenty-First Century*,” in Holding on to the Faith: Confessional Traditions in American Christianity, eds. Douglas A. Sweeney and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2008), pp. 172-186.

⁵ For discussion of ethnicity and religious identity in Greek immigrant religious life see Victor Roudometof and Anna Karpathakis, *Greek Americans and transnationalism*, in Paul Kennedy and Victor Roudometof editors, Communities across borders new immigrants and transnational cultures. London: Routledge 2002.

Church as social norms have changed and the legal system protects the civil rights of gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals. On the matter of homosexuality, GOA leaders have been mostly silent. The Assembly of Bishops was quick to publish disagreement with the United States Supreme Court decision on June 26, 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges in the July/August 2015 issue of the *Orthodox Observer*, calling the decision an “invented” constitutional right.⁶

On the matter of church governance, transparency, and shared responsibilities that respects the voices of the laity GOA Bishops have proven silent or vague. In the current cultural climate, GOA Bishops can no longer rely on the ascribed status encoded in the office of the Bishop to lead.

Fundamentalism and Elder Ephraim

Let’s turn our attention to the fundamentalism emerging from within the GOA. In 2006, I was invited to write an article on the Eastern Orthodox Church in the 21st century for the Confessional Traditions in American Christianity project. The Confessional Traditions project was hosted by the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE) and funded by the Lilly Endowment. In the article, I discuss the legacy of race discrimination, legal segregation, and Greek nationalism in shaping Greek Orthodox personal and collective identity and parish life in the 1900s. The article is published in *Holding on the Faith: Confessional Traditions in American Christianity* edited by Sweeny

⁶ For Eastern Orthodox Gay and Lesbian Christian discussion and perspective see www.orthodoxandgay.com, and www.inclusiveorthodoxy.org.

and Hambrick-Stowe. Since this publication I continue to track developments in the GOA I wrote about in the Confessional article including the impact of increasing interfaith marriages in the GOA, the expansion of pan-Orthodox missions and social justice initiatives, the role of converts in clergy and lay leadership roles, and church governance among other topics. In 2009 while tracking these developments and preparing a manuscript addressing cultural and social changes and contested discourses in the GOA I was contacted by a member of a GOA about Elder Ephraim's role in GOA parish life. While working on the Confession project, I noted several Greek Orthodox monasteries cropping up in North America over a few short years under Elder Ephraim. GOA parishes in urban setting are the primary locus of my research and I had not considered monasteries relevant. I wrongly assumed that Elder Ephraim and his monasteries did not factor in an account of Greek Orthodox parish life and lived experiences of parishioners in North America.

Elder Ephraim's monasteries initially were welcomed by Greek Orthodox Christians. Monasteries are long-standing on landscapes in Greece and throughout the Eastern Orthodox world. Monasteries are repositories of Orthodox material culture, sacred texts, music, icons, and the material remains of saints. Monasteries harbour stories of miracles and lives of saints. Orthodox Christians visit monasteries to find hope, grieve, and receive comfort. For Orthodox Christians, monasteries throughout the Orthodox world have been pilgrimage destinations, places for spiritual support in the face of illness, broken relationships, and loss. For some Orthodox Christians, visiting a monastery is a respite from the daily grind. Making a promise to venerate a miracle icon or relic housed in a monastery is not uncommon in therapeutic quests among

Orthodox Christians facing disruptive illnesses or personal misfortune. Seeking spiritual comfort by engaging the sacred space and artefacts housed in a monastery coupled with scientific-based medicine is an acceptable Orthodox Christian practice. Asking for prayers from a nun or monk on behalf of personal hopes, sorrows, and restoring wellbeing are also appropriate practices among Orthodox Christians.

At first glance, Elder Ephraim's monasteries were expected to enrich the spiritual lives of Orthodox Christians in North America. Ardent critics of Elder Ephraim and his institutions defend the place of the what they call "normal" Orthodox monasteries in Orthodox Christian life. Among his critics, the Orthodox religious cultural system that values the place of the monastery in Greek culture and religious life falls apart when monastic practices are introduced in parishes and imposed as standards for daily living among the laity. Clergy and laity disagree with the enactments of sacraments—baptisms, confession, holy unction, and funerals—conducted routinely in Elder Ephraim's monasteries displacing the authority of the parish priests and undermining parish communities.

Elder Ephraim is a pivotal and polarising figure in the GOA. His teachings have been unevenly received among GOA laity and clergy. According to some GOA members, his teachings and related practices conflict with the modern world and contemporary Greek American life. Some call him a living saint and spiritual healer of soul and body. Others call him a dangerous cult figure, an imposter, and religious fundamentalist. In some GOA parishes, his teachings are welcomed as safeguards against encroaching secular and plural socio-cultural forces undermining true beliefs

and practices that define the Orthodox tradition. Others reject his ideas and authority. To interpret ethnographic and archival data I have gathered on the Elder Ephraim's teachings and institutions I engaged the works of Professor Rebecca More on Jonestown and the Peoples Temple and Professor James Richardson on new religious movements among other sociologists who are studying religious movements looking at the role of the rooted in charismatic authority.

Elder Ephraim's worldview and teachings are available in three texts published by the Saint Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in Florence, Arizona: The Counsels from the Holy Mountains, A Call from the Holy Mountain and the recently released The Departure of the Soul According to the Teaching of the Orthodox Church. The "Holy Mountain" in the titles refers to Mount Athos, conceived as a sacred Orthodox territory by Elder Ephraim and his followers. The first two texts are a collection of Elder Ephraim's letters and homilies addressed to his spiritual children. The Departure of the Soul is "dedicated to our Spiritual Father in Christ, Geronda Ephraim who dedicated his life to forming Christ in his spiritual children." In these books, the reader is introduced to a world of spiritual elders, spiritual fathers advising spiritual children, aerial toll houses, demons, fear, loathing, hell, and paradise. The discourse is xenophobic, paternalistic, and homophobic. Orthodox Christians who challenge the Elder's teachings and do not submit to his spiritual authority are condemned.

Elder Ephraim's Following and his Critics

Elder Ephraim's monasteries attract cradle and convert Orthodox Christians from across the globe. He attracts young urban professionals; adult and young adult converts from varied Christian denominations; wealthy entrepreneurs; skilled and semi-skilled

workers; stay at home mothers, retirees, and seminarians. Elder Ephraim's followers refer to him as a living saint who has a gift from God to work miracles, heal the sick, and provide instruction to guard the soul. His spiritual abilities include prophetic insight into the devil's agency in claiming human souls.

The recently released [The Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Monasteries](#) edited by Alexei Krindatch and published by Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Press promotes Elder Ephraim and his monasteries. The Atlas provides information for visitors including hours of operation, what to expect, and how to dress—long trousers and long-sleeved shirts for men and for women skirts below the knees, long-sleeved blouses, and head scarves. At the flagship monastery, Saint Anthony's, where Elder Ephraim lives, visitors may seek a blessing and confession from Elder Ephraim.

Elder Ephraim's beliefs and rules introduced in parish life by clergy carriers have resulted in sweeping changes in parish routines and institutions. Within parishes under the leadership of clergy followers of Elder Ephraim parishioner dispositions and bodily practices have changed, relationships have broken, and long-standing parish communities have fragmented. Several in the GOA clergy and lay people have stated that Elder Ephraim is a serious challenge the GOA faces as his beliefs and practices have alienated parishioners while church leaders have ignored the problem and remain indifferent to the voices who oppose him.

The introduction of Elder Ephraim's beliefs and related changes in religious practices and parish institutions have resulted in fragmentation and loss of over half of the membership in three parishes I have observed. By 2006, Orthodox Christians who

had come into contact with Elder Ephraim teachings questioned his otherworldly claims, miracle-working abilities, and religious intolerance. Alarmed by homilies that spoke of aerial toll houses, the virtues of dying from cancer, an unforgiving God with no love or mercy for the disobedient, contempt and condemnation of non-Orthodox people, shunning Orthodox Christians who did not follow Elder Ephraim's beliefs and practices, attacks on Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis and wider work on behalf of ecumenical dialogue, a focus on sexual behaviour during confession, demanding that married couples live like brother and sister after children are born, refusing to offer communion to individuals who had not gone to confession, and denying LGBTQ Orthodox Christians communion have resulted in countless individuals and families leaving their parish communities. Two urban parishes I have observed have lost over 150 members each, about half the parish. Most who left had significant bonds to the parish. People who left include members of the parish council, parish council presidents, Sunday school teachers, and choir members and directors. Many of these individuals served on church boards and offices. These individuals had long-standing parish commitments, friendships, and memories forged over several generations. They expected to live as members of the parish community until they died. Leaving their parish homes was a difficult and emotionally painful decision. After leaving the parish many are without a church, some seek a new parish in the GOA or other Orthodox jurisdiction.

Challenges to Elder Ephraim's teachings and institutions have come from college educated men and women, urban professionals, and entrepreneurs. Leaders in the effort to address Elder Ephraim's encroachments into parish life and the lived

experiences of Orthodox Christians include long standing members of GOA parish communities. They have served on parish councils and in leadership positions in GOA organizations. They have been members of the choir and served as Sunday school teachers. They are proud of their Greek heritage and invested in Greek institutions, including the Greek Orthodox Church. They are also fully integrated in American society, professionally successful, and upwardly mobile. As a group, their aim was to see the Orthodox Church maintain its Greek heritage and rich liturgical and community life in a plural society. They seek to build a church that allows for unity and dialogue among Orthodox jurisdictions and meaningful engagement with other people from across the American plural religious landscape. The religious enclave mentality imposed by priests following Elder Ephraim in their parish communities, the arcane practices that subvert individual choice and free will, and religious intolerance are unacceptable to this group.

As a first step towards addressing the disruptive teachings of Elder Ephraim in parish life, parish leaders contacted their local bishop. They expected that the bishop would agree that the beliefs and behaviours the priest were spreading in the parish from the altar and pulpit were heretical, outrageous, and unacceptable. They expected the bishop to discipline and/or remove the priest. The local bishop did not see a problem in the words and actions of their appointed priests in these three parishes. In each, the priests were allowed to continue the work of revising liturgical and sacramental practices, religious education, and community events in the light of Elder Ephraim's teaching.

Concerned laity in 2010 persuaded Archbishop Demetrios to authorize a Monastery Review Committee (MRC) to investigate Elder Ephraim's monasteries. The MRC conducted interviews among individuals and families who had been impacted by Elder Ephraim's teachings and institutions. The investigation was national in scope and included interviews with nearly 100 individuals. The MRC group completed the investigation and submitted a report to the Archbishop in 2011. The report findings have not been disseminated. In this contentious climate, the GOA continued to endorse Elder Ephraim and monasticism by listing Elder Ephraim's monasteries on the Archdiocese website⁷ along with an article that explains the place of monasteries in Orthodox Christians life.⁸

Several individuals interviewed for this study travelled to Istanbul to meet with Patriarch Bartholomew to discuss the harm to individuals, the break-up of families, fragmentation of parish communities resulting from Elder Ephraim's teachings. The Patriarch was sympathetic to the concerns but placed the burden on North American bishops to address the problem.

Lay leaders approached the faculty at Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary (Brookline, MA) to discuss Elder Ephraim and to ask the faculty and administrative body to respond and challenge the heretical ideas spreading in GOA parishes. Interviews with individuals who met with the faculty indicated that the faculty did not see a problem with Elder Ephraim or his monasteries. Elder Ephraim was a

⁷ See <https://edit.goarch.org/archdiocese/monasteries> for a list of GOA monasteries with links that provide information for visitors.

⁸ See <https://edit.goarch.org/ourfaith/monasticism> for discussion of the place of monasticism in Orthodox history and spiritual formation.

subject for a campus-wide debate organized by seminary students and faculty. An interview with a student who participated in the debate reported a large audience for this debate. At the end, the President announced that both sides had made plausible arguments.

Lay groups have launched web sites to educate Orthodox Christians about Elder Ephraim, his teachings, and damaging impact on unsuspecting individuals and parishes. Two web sites directly address the matter of Elder Ephraim: Go Truth Reform, www.gotruthreform.org and We Are Orthodox: www.weareorthodox.com.

The mission of ***Go Truth Reform*** is as follows:

We Greek Orthodox Christians of the Metropolis of Chicago will no longer accept the conditions that have spread and caused irreparable harm to our Faith. We are of the opinion that our current Hierarchs of the Metropolis of Chicago are complicit in allowing a cancerous cult to permeate the theology of our church. Therefore, we will focus the efforts and attention of our members to expose inappropriate teachings, practices and customs as they concern our Faith.

We Are Orthodox frames their purpose, vision of problem, and church leadership as follows:

There is a growing fundamentalist movement in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese that we vehemently object to. This has nothing to do with any of our ethnic backgrounds. But it has everything to do with a type of monasticism that is spreading extreme fundamentalism which is affecting clergy and laity alike. In many reported cases, it is *militant*. This is also affecting other Orthodox jurisdictions. We are not monastics. We have nothing against monasticism. But the fact of the matter is that mimicking a monk is not a litmus test for how sincere our commitment to our Faith is.

The problem is that there are those in the Church who insist on promoting the idea that holiness only resides within monastic circles. This undercuts the very nature of the Church and her sacramental life. We honor and respect monasticism as *another* way of life, but *it* is not the Church. We all are. *Together. There is no exclusivity.* We are not aristocratic elitists.

Both groups seek to inform Orthodox Christians about Elder Ephraim's teachings

and harmful impact on families, individuals, clergy, and parishes.

Conclusion

Challenges from the laity to expose Ephraim's teachings and disruptive and harmful impact on individuals, families, and institutions have exposed weaknesses in GOA institutions and leaders. Customary prohibitions against criticizing GOA institutions and leaders no longer hold. Discussions about the quality of an HCHC education and preparation to serve parishes abound as many of the clergy carriers of Elder Ephraim's teachings are graduates from Holy Cross Seminary. GOA leaders can no longer count on ethnocentrism, ethnically separated neighbourhoods, endogamy, and a shared understanding of Greek tradition to control parishes and lived Orthodox Christian experience. Incumbent bishops who have dismissed laity concerns and allowed the spread of Ephraim's teachings have lost the confidence of lay people actively engaged in stopping Elder Ephraim and/or have been harmed by his teachings.

In this account, we have seen that there are contested voices and strands seeking to define Greek Orthodox Church purpose and identity in a plural American society. Attention has been directed to Elder Ephraim who along with his following in a few short years have spread beliefs and practices that some embraced, and others find unacceptable. Elder Ephraim's teachings and institutions aim to hinder discussion of

expanding the roles of women in the church, silence LGBTQ Orthodox Christians, and undermine ecumenical and pan-Orthodox activities. In the American plural and multi-vocal socio-cultural climate there are no easy answers for Church leaders and laity as they observe the Orthodox Church decline in the number of adherents, parishes, and communities.